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An exploration of the notion of the ‘Good Enough School’

Chris James (University of Bath, UK)
Izhar Oplatka (Tel Aviv University, Israel)

Address for correspondence:

Professor Chris James
Department of Education
University of Bath
Claverton Down
Bath, UK
BA2 7AY

Phone +44(0)1225 383280
Fax +44(0)1225 386113
E-mail C.James@bath.ac.uk

Abstract

In many countries, expectations of schools are very high and rising with increasingly serious consequences for schools if those expectations are not met. It is as if only ‘perfect schools’ will suffice. Only then will all those with an interest in schools be satisfied. In this article, we argue that schools cannot be perfect and that indeed perfection is undesirable for important educational/developmental reasons. We use the ‘good enough mother’ concept to explain and develop an alternative notion, the ‘good enough school’. We draw on a round-table discussion at the 2013 BELMAS Annual Conference in Edinburgh where we explained the concept and discussed vignettes of events in schools in relation to ‘good enough school’ idea.

Keywords

Good enough school, school accountability, school organization, school management, school inspection

Introduction

Expectations of schools in many countries are very high and are rising. Stakeholders of all kinds - governors, headteachers, students, central government, parents and employers - have or are urged to have the highest expectations of student education and care and to continually raise those expectations (Ravitz, 2010). Parental/student choice, school inspection, and education policies have for some while driven high and rising expectations (Oplatka, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2002). For those who fail to comply, the stakes are similarly elevated and rising. It is as if only ‘perfect schools’, as we call them, will suffice. Such perfect schools provide everything every learner wants, nothing is left to chance, everything that can be done for the learner is done so that the students do well in tests and examinations. Only when all schools are perfect in this way will all those with an interest in schools be completely satisfied.

The purpose of this article is to argue that creating perfect schools as we have described them above is neither possible nor, for important educational/developmental reasons, is it desirable.

Drawing on the ‘good enough mother’ concept, first articulated by Donald Winnicott 60 years ago (Winnicott, 1953), we develop an alternative notion, the ‘good enough school’. We argue that this concept may better reflect the complex reality of educational/organisational practices in schools and may help principals and teachers better understand the limitations – and even inappropriateness - of attempting to create perfect schools with perfect educational processes and perfect outcomes.

Following this introduction, we explore the central conceptual issues before presenting three vignettes of events in schools that have the purpose of enabling an exploration of the idea of the good enough school. We then discuss some of the implications of the concept through our own deliberations and those of colleagues who attended a roundtable discussion of the good enough school idea at the BELMAS Annual Conference which was held in Edinburgh in July 2013.

Conceptual issues

In this section, we discuss two main ideas: the ‘good enough’ concept and the boundaries that delimit good enough practice.

The ‘good enough’ concept

In the first half of the 20th century, behaviourist notions of parenting dominated. Parents and especially mothers were told that babies should have a regular sleep schedule to train them to sleep through the night; picking young infants up and holding them when they cried would only encourage further crying; and that explicit shows of affection would not enable their children to become strong, independent adults who were prepared to live in a what was viewed as a harsh world.

Spock (1946) encouraged parents to take an alternative approach, to view their children as individuals and to be responsive to their needs. That was the common sense of good mothering (Spock, 1946). By extrapolation, parents and mothers in particular who responded to their child’s (every) need would be ideal parent/mothers and in some sense perfect – they could do no more for their child.

Winnicott (1953) countered the aspiration of achieving perfection by arguing that the best mothering is not perfect mothering. The best form of mothering is fundamentally positive and of good intent but it leaves a ‘space’ between the child’s expressed need and the mother meeting that need. That space enables the child to grow and develop. Arguably, Winnicott released parents - and again mothers in particular - from the burden of having to be perfect and the guilt associated with not being so.

According to Winnicott, the good-enough mother begins motherhood by almost completely adapting to and thereby responding to her child’s needs. However, she gradually adapts less and less completely, according to the child’s growing ability to cope with her ‘failure’ (Winnicott, 1953) and indeed as she re-asserts the importance of her own needs. In this way, the mother creates a ‘potential space’ (Winnicott, 1971) which enables the child to move in a positive and appropriate direction. As a consequence, the child is enabled to become autonomous and independent, and learns to cope with disappointments and frustrations, respect others’ limitations and needs, and take responsibility for doing things for her/himself.

The good enough concept appears to be applicable to educational/organisational practice in schools. Such an application would not suggest some ideal perfection but the creation of the

kind of potential space (Winnicott, 1971) that the ‘good enough mother’ creates for her child. In schools, this space would enable students to move in an appropriate direction, to become self-sufficient and personally responsible, develop resilience and to value others for who and what they are.

There are of course risks associated with the creation of the potential space created by ‘good enough educational and organisational practice’. As well as creating an opportunity for learning and development, good enough educational practice also creates a possibility that learning and development will not take place, or that actual harm of some kind may result, which are manifestly undesirable outcomes. For those reasons, the good enough mother notion is often associated with the provision of a holding environment which gives a secure, contained environment for the developing child. In a parallel sense, pedagogic and organisational practices in educational settings also need to provide a containing environment (James, 2011; Dale and James, 2013) to obviate the potential for undesirable outcomes. Somewhat paradoxically, it is as if a safe educational environment provided by the containing environment allows risks to be taken.

Our central argument however is that an educational environment that is too safe/perfect does not enable the taking of risks that, in turn, allow students to develop into self-managing, autonomous learners. For example, a mathematics teacher who is so fully committed to her students' academic success in national examinations might teach her students to stick rigidly to (her) particular ways of problem solving or only accepting standard answers to sample questions she gives them from national tests. She believes she is helping the students, protecting them from harm as she prepares them for the test as effectively as possible. Arguably, in so doing, she rules out any opportunities for creative and autonomous learning.

A perfect environment thus seeks to prevent and avoid risk and a good enough environment seeks to allow a space of risk in an appropriate and contained manner. Contrasting a good enough environment with an inadequate learning and organisational environment also then becomes important. An inadequate learning and organisational environment also allows risks to be taken but such risks are not appropriate, may not be contained and may therefore result in harm. Although our central concern here is with the pressures schools and those who work in them are under to provide a perfect learning environment, we do recognise there is also a distinction between good enough practices and imperfect/unsafe practices.

Interestingly, Waters (2013) raises the idea of “Good Enough” (p. 124) as a category for school inspections by Ofsted in England. He argues that inspection cannot differentiate properly between the ‘Outstanding’, ‘Good’ and ‘Requires Improvement’ Ofsted inspection judgement categories. What is required is ‘Good Enough’ and ‘Not Good Enough’ categories, with the former category indicating some sense of adequacy in a school’s provision. He further argues that it is then for such schools to “To demonstrate that it is outstanding to its own community including parents, employers, neighbours and pupils” (p. 124). In this article, we are not arguing that a good enough school will be in some sense adequate rather the opposite. The good enough school in our sense has the potential to be an excellent learning environment for students and staff. Moreover, those who have an interest in the school, the groups Waters identifies, may well want the school to be perfect in the way we have described such schools above.

The boundaries between the ‘inadequate’ and the ‘good enough’ and between the ‘good enough’ and the ‘perfect’

Implicit in the arguments we have made in the previous section is that there is a continuum that spans inadequate, good enough and perfect educational and organisational practices in schools. The important consideration, however, is the boundaries between the inadequate and the good enough school environments and good enough and perfect environments.

Establishing and maintaining those boundaries is clearly problematic for teachers in schools and those responsible for the operation and conduct of schools – staff with leadership and management responsibilities and school governors. In a theoretical sense, exploring the nature of boundaries, can facilitate an understanding of the terrains they separate (Hernes, 2004).

Organisational boundaries are the result of an animating force of some kind, which is the organisational phenomenon that provides an underlying rationale for boundary formation (Eddy Spicer and James, 2010). The animating force is the central feature of the main picture of the empirical world that is used. It may not be immediately apparent and may need to be identified through its effects. Understanding the animating forces that establish the boundary between practices that are inadequate and good enough and those that are good enough and perfect are of particular interest in an exploration of good enough educational and organisational practices in schools and the whole notion of the good enough school.

Illustrative vignettes

In this section, we set out some vignettes to enable an exploration of the good enough school concept. These narratives are based on actual events known to the authors but they have been changed for ethical reasons, which largely relate to protecting the anonymity of those involved. Here, for each vignette, we present the context, the narrative account and our own brief commentary. These vignettes were considered by the 14 colleagues who attended a roundtable discussion of the good enough school idea at the 2013 BELMAS Annual Conference. For that discussion, we posed a number of questions that were related to the appropriateness of the educational and organisational actions described, what risks were associated with those actions, and boundary matters – how were any distinctions between inadequate, good enough and perfect practices they identified established. The outcomes of the deliberations at the conference inform the discussion section that follows the vignettes.

Vignette 1

Context

This incident concerns a Year 9 (13-14 year old) student – Samuel - who attends a mixed comprehensive school. His behaviour record at the school is poor. It lists numerous in-school and after school detentions and misbehaviour incidents of various kinds, some of which were violent. A deputy headteacher has been ‘keeping an eye on’ Samuel and the vignette is the deputy headteacher’s account of his conversation with Samuel’s father. It followed Samuel’s two-day exclusion which was imposed for a violent incident with another child which Samuel instigated.

The account

I explained the situation to Samuel’s father, Jason. I said that Samuel had been making progress with controlling his temper, albeit slow progress and at some considerable cost to the school but that this incident was a step too far. Jason said there had been issues between Samuel and the other boy involved in the incident and that the school should have done more to calm things down between them, for example by talking to them both and sorting the

issues between them. He said that Samuel's not naturally violent and that the school should make more allowances and help him more. Samuel's early family life had not been ideal and the school should be more understanding.

I explained that we did understand but that Samuel did need to learn to control his behaviour and conform to the standards the school requires. He said Samuel had been doing well with his DP – that's a development programme we put troublesome students on, it helps us to monitor their progress and to reward them if they do OK – and that we should take that into account. I agreed that Samuel was making progress but said that there had been other incidents as his record showed. He wouldn't accept my point of view and the meeting ended with him effectively walking out saying we should have done more to help Samuel before resorting to an exclusion.

Commentary

One view is that the school indeed should have been more understanding. The school should have made more allowances and offered additional support, perhaps through mediation in this instance, and other strategies to help Samuel manage his behaviour and his school experience generally. In essence, their practice has been inadequate. Another standpoint is that the school has already helped Samuel enough and that he – and his father - need to recognise that there are limits and that Samuel needs to be more responsible. To act any other way would do him a disservice in the long-run. At some stage, he is going to need to fully understand the seriousness of his misbehaviour and that he needs to take full responsibility for his own actions. A further view is that the school should do everything in its power to keep the student in school, almost regardless of cost, in order to enable him to learn. That is what the school is there to do.

Vignette 2

Context

This vignette concerns Stephen, a Year 7 (11-12 year old) student at a mixed comprehensive school, his mother and the teacher who is in charge of Stephen's tutorial group. The incident started just as several tutorial groups and their teachers were about to set off for a week-long field trip. The account is by the teacher.

The account

I was getting the students organised to get on the bus for the field trip, it's always a bit of a chaotic time. There were a few parents around; it's nice to have them there at this particular moment, saying good-bye to their children for a whole week. It can be difficult for some parents and some of the students too.

Anyway, as I was putting some of the bags on the bus and checking things, Stephen's Mum came up to me and went to hand me a bottle of tablets. "This is Stephen's medication, he needs to take two tablets every day last thing at night, they're for his acne". I think it was for acne – it was something like that anyway, not life threatening. She went on, "Please give him two tablets a night, he'll never remember, you know what he's like". I recall thinking, "Why not give them to Stephen to look after, I'm sure it'll be OK and I'm sure he'll remember, and anyway this should have been all sorted before now". I have to say I was a bit 'short' with her. We were trying to get 90 students organised. We had a protocol for students taking medication who were going on the trip and she hadn't raised the issue before. I was in a bit of a rush and didn't feel this was the moment to get into a discussion over the issue, so I said "Yes and that I'd sort it".

We were staying in a youth hostel, and shortly after we got there, I found the tablets in my pocket. I'd forgotten all about them if I'm honest. So I went and found Stephen, who's a nice sensible lad actually, I get on with him fine, we'd developed a good relationship since he joined the school. I gave him the tablets and told him in no uncertain terms that he should look after them – it was his responsibility – and that he should keep them safe and take them as directed and that if there was any problem with them he'd be for it. I said I'd check at the end of the week that he'd done as he'd been told. I gave him one of my 'looks' so he knew I meant business. He went off very sheepishly.

Actually, I didn't check up on him, in fact I forgot all about it. You know what running a field trip for 90 12 year olds is like. We had a great week and Stephen seemed to really enjoy himself and grow in confidence during the week. I did see him as we were getting back on the bus to go back. I said "All alright with those tablets, Stephen?" He said 'Yes sir'. I said 'Good lad, well done', and left it at that. His Mum didn't mention it at the parents' evening a few weeks later.

Commentary

One viewpoint is that the school, in this case the teacher, should have taken full responsibility for the care of the student according to his mother's wishes, after all the school is *in loco parentis* on such occasions. Another perspective is that the teacher in acting the way he did – pushing the responsibility onto the student – enabled the student to take responsibility for his own affairs, and to develop as a result. Yet another view point is that the teacher's practice was inadequate, far too risky and indeed dangerous

Vignette 3

Context

This incident occurred during the selection process for a deputy headteacher with a curriculum management responsibility at a co-educational secondary school in England. At the last inspection by Ofsted, the school inspection service in England, the school was judged to be good and over 70% of students get five or more A*-C grades at GCSE. The incident occurred when the candidates were allowed to look around the school and to visit lessons. Following the visits, the candidates were invited to discuss their tour of the school with the selection panel. The vignette is the headteacher's account of the feeding back process.

The account

One candidate had visited a number of classes, which impressed the selection panel. When asked what he made of the experience, he was very clear: "I think this school could do with implementing the 'Three part lesson' across the whole school. There's just too much variation, and lesson objectives are not written on the board". One of the governors asked him what the 'Three part lesson' was and the candidate explained: "One, introduction; two, activity; and three, plenary discussion – Ofsted love it". "Oh, like the sermon idea", the governor replied: "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em; tell 'em; then tell em' what you've told em': I like that idea, very good. That objectives idea's a good one too".

In the discussion amongst the selection panel after, she remained enthusiastic. I explained the disadvantages of the three part lesson dictate, in essence that it limits creativity, is a rather stultifying learning diet and it inhibits a spirit of enquiry. She was unconvinced: "We've got to do everything we can to make sure the children learn, and if Ofsted think it's a good idea

then it's OK with me. We do need to get an outstanding grade next time. I also liked that idea of writing up the learning objectives on the board – it makes things very clear". I made my point again but in the end thought it best not to get into a big discussion about it at that moment. We didn't appoint him.

Commentary

The views of the headteacher and governor in effect illustrate the good enough and the perfect standpoints respectively. In the view of the governor and indeed the applicant, the three part lesson and making the objectives explicit give staff and students a highly reliable rule to work to. Such an approach reduces the risk that students may not learn and is therefore bound to enhance learning overall. The alternative standpoint, that of the headteacher, is that while the three part lesson has its merits, there is insufficient flexibility to allow students and teachers to explore and to learn and develop through, creative, innovative and different ways of working. They will become dependent of the three part lesson methodology. None of those involved were advocating inadequate lessons, for example lessons that were unstructured or unplanned.

Discussion

The vignettes illustrate the difficulty of establishing clear boundaries between what is inadequate, good enough in the sense we are using it, and perfect. In the first vignettes – Samuel's poor behaviour and his temporary exclusion from the school – the school's organisational and pedagogic practices do seem to be good enough. It isn't that the school has done nothing to provide the containing environment that will allow the student to develop. Such an approach would have been inadequate. The school has attempted to structure the student's development and behaviour to enable him to develop. However, there are limits to the resources the school can reasonably commit, which is similar to the limit to the resources the good enough mother/parent has to meet the child's every need. There are also limits to what the school is prepared to tolerate in terms of the student's behaviour and the kind of containing structure the school can reasonably be expected to put in place. Achieving perfection in this case (making sure the student continues to attend and to behave properly) is beyond the resources the school can fairly commit to any individual pupil and arguably would not enable the student to learn to take responsibility for his own actions. Thus the animating forces appear to be configured by an interplay between the available resources and desirability of the educational outcomes. The discussion at the BELMAS Conference session raised the issue of the deciding on the best way schools can prepare students for the future and that part of that was learning to take responsibility for one's own actions.

The second vignette raises another set of complex issues. Arguably, the student's mother was in the wrong in not following the rules for students taking medications of the school trip. The teacher then compounded matters by doing what he did and took what is arguably a very risky course of action. In this case, he 'got away with it' and apparently to good effect but it was highly risky. The discussion at the BELMAS Annual Conference was very concerned about the risk issue and understandably so. It is not difficult to envisage dangerous scenarios that might have resulted. Thus there was a sense that good enough educational and organisational practice does involve risk but deciding on the level of risk can be very difficult. There are some matters though, and the matter of medication is one, where rules must be clear and must be followed. The matter of the parents' wishes and the trust that there must be between parents and teachers were also discussed (which is also an aspect of Vignette 1) and that this particular matter was one where that trust should have been secure.

The third vignette raises explicitly the pedagogic and organisational aspects of creating a good enough learning environment. If pedagogic practice in the school is very weak then arguably the strategies advocated by the deputy headteacher will bring about change for the better. Thus the move is from inadequate to perfect. If practice is already good enough where there is a space for innovation, creativity and variation, then the strategies being advocated may be a backward step. The potential space is closed down. Thus moving towards good enough organisational and pedagogic practices does depend on the starting point. In the discussion at the BELMAS Conference, participants felt that good enough practice should be considered in terms of its aims and intentions. What is the intention and rationale for opening the potential space created by good enough practice? There was also a view expressed at the Conference that the good enough notion created potential for enhanced learning and that for educators “It pushes you to do good things” both organisational and pedagogic terms.

At the BELMAS Conference, the discussion group expressed a view that good enough practice is underpinned by the accepted norms in the school and one participant put it very straightforwardly: “Good enough practice is the things that we do normally every day”. That sentiment resonates with Winnicott’s (1953) view that good enough mothering is something that good mothers do every day without necessarily knowing it. There was also a view that the concept did enable an exploration of teaching and organising roles, the limitations of those roles and what was permitted and what was forbidden in those roles.

Concluding comments

In this article, we have explored the notion of the good enough school. In essence, we have sought to position good enough pedagogic and organisational practice in schools between inadequate practice and perfect practice. The undesirability of the inadequate school is clear. Such a school would be where: the environment is ‘unsafe’ in a general sense; students’ educational and care needs are not met, and where the containing environment is either not secure or is so harsh that students are unwilling to take the risk entailed in learning. In contrast, the perfect school is where every student’s every learning and care requirement is responded to and fully met in order to totally guarantee student care and learning outcomes. The containing environment in some ways becomes a constraining environment – albeit of good intent. Nothing is left to chance and no risk is taken. The pedagogic and organisational practices in the good enough school create a potential space that enables student development and growth and is appropriately contained. The potential space changes as the student becomes more autonomous and independent.

In addition to exploring the good enough school concept, we have begun an exploration of the boundaries that separate the three zones – the inadequate, the good enough and the perfect. The notion of risk emerges as a significant animating force in the configurations of the boundaries. In the inadequate zone, there is a strong and evident risk that learning will not take place and the care of the student will be jeopardised. That is separated from the good enough zone, where there is risk but that risk is not undue. The good enough zone is separated from the perfect school where risk is minimised or prevented.

The nature of the potential space is also of interest in considering the distinction between the zones. In the inadequate school, the potential space is too large; in the perfect school it is too small, whereas in the good enough school it is just right. The nature of the containment is also of interest in considering the distinction between the zones. In the inadequate school, it will be inadequate or even absent; in the good enough school, it will be secure but not unduly

constraining, whilst in the perfect school it will be tightly formed and will constrain and practically smother any potential for creativity.

We consider that the notion of good enough school could be a useful heuristic and interpretive device for alternative considerations of the notion of schools as institutions. We invite others – practitioners and researchers - to explore the idea and its usefulness.

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